



**DNR Testimony to the
Senate Natural Resources Committee
On 2006 CWD Hunting Season Rules**

Chairman Kedzie, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the Chronic Wasting Disease hunting season rule. This rule package establishes the deer hunting framework for the 2006 season, which will be our 5th deer season since the discovery of CWD in February, 2002.

CWD in southern Wisconsin (attachment) represents a significant threat to the state's white-tailed deer population and our strong heritage of deer hunting in the state. Wisconsin has more than 700,000 deer hunters who have harvested an average of 460,000 deer annually during the past decade. Wisconsin deer hunters want a healthy deer herd and that our goal as well. Deer hunting generates more than \$500 million dollars in retail sales and nearly \$1 billion in total impact to the state's economy each year.

Without intervention, CWD will spread throughout Wisconsin and the percentage deer infected with CWD will substantially increase. As all of you know, our state has chosen to actively intervene. The two basic disease management strategies we've implemented are reducing the infected deer herds and annually removing as many sick and susceptible deer as possible from the infected areas through expanded hunting seasons. These strategies require a long-term commitment to be successful. CWD management is our number one wildlife program priority because of the importance of deer to our state.

In short, we are trying to prevent what has happened out west. They have witnessed steady increases in prevalence over the past few years in numerous local populations. Prevalence on some local winter ranges now exceeds 25-30% (attachment).

We recognize that CWD management will not be successful without the cooperation of landowners and hunters. This year's rule package continues an evolution in CWD hunting seasons toward a framework that appropriately blends disease management with the desires of hunters and landowners.

In the first 3 seasons of CWD management, gun seasons were greatly expanded and hunters were required to earn their buck by harvesting an

antlerless deer first. These seasons were strong on disease management and winter helicopter surveys indicated they reduced the infected deer herds. However, we heard from many hunters and landowners, as well as this committee that these seasons did not meet their desires.

Last year, we modified the CWD hunting rules by shortening the gun season length and limiting the earn-a-buck requirement only to the late October – early November time period. This year, we are further responding to concerns with a number of recommended changes. The early gun season in the DEZ will be shortened from 18 days to 9 days and moved up ahead of the rut to mid-October. The early gun season in the HRZ will remain 4 days. The late gun season in both the DEZ and HRZ will end on December 10 instead of January 3 to address landowner concerns. And, hunters may take a deer of the either sex during the entire season. Specific season dates for this fall are:

- DEZ and HRZ archery season: September 16 – January 7
- DEZ and HRZ youth hunt: October 7-8 (statewide)
- DEZ early gun season: October 14-22
- HRZ early gun season: October 19-22
- DEZ and HRZ late gun season: November 18—December 10

While this year's season definitely goes much further in addressing hunter and landowner desires, it must also adequately address CWD management needs. In 2005, antlerless harvests dropped in the CWD management zones and our winter Helicopter surveys showed mixed deer populations responses, stable to increasing the Western DEZ and decreased in the Eastern DEZ and the Hollandale Area.

We will be watching this issue closely, but, we want to give hunters and landowners a chance with rules that are more to their liking. Many hunters believe they can accomplish the needed deer harvest with shorter gun seasons that concentrate hunting activity, particularly on the two opening weekends, resulting in more deer movement and high harvests. We hope they are right.

However, if 2006 antlerless deer harvests continue to fall in the CWD zones and the deer herd starts to grow; we will have to take corrective action. If we want to prevent what has happened in west from happening here in Wisconsin, we will need to put disease management ahead of recreational desires. The rule before you today will allow the Natural Resources Board to extend the early gun season by a week and use the earn-a-buck rule in future years, if needed.

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today.